

BUREAU OF ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND SAFETY
Division of Health
Idaho Department of Health and Welfare

What Every Parent Should Know:

Asthma and Your Child

Your child may be one of many children who have asthma. Asthma is the most common chronic (long-term) disease in children.

What is asthma? Asthma is a serious, chronic disease of the airways of the lungs. When a child has asthma, his airways are inflamed, and he may have breathing problems. "Chronic" means that the disease is always present, even when your child feels good. When something irritates your child's airways, symptoms of wheezing, coughing, breathlessness, and chest tightness may occur, making it difficult for him to breathe normally.

Asthma breathing problems usually happen in "episodes or attacks," but the inflammation at the root of asthma is continuous. When a child has asthma, the insides of his airways are often red, swollen, and sensitive to certain things he breathes from the air, such as tobacco smoke (environmental tobacco smoke or secondhand smoke), pollen, and dust.

During an asthma attack, the muscles around the airways tighten and make the airways smaller. That is why it is hard to breathe when he has an asthma attack. The airway may become even more swollen and also plugged with sticky mucus. When he tries to breathe, his chest might feel tight and sound wheezy.

How do I know if my child has asthma? Only a doctor can diagnose asthma. However, the following warning signs may indicate that your child has asthma:

- A cough that never seems to go away
- Wheezing, especially during or after physical activity
- Shortness of breath
- Tightness of the chest

A child who experiences these symptoms should be seen by a doctor for a diagnosis.

What can you do if your child has asthma? If your child has been diagnosed with asthma, you can help control the disease by:

- Learning to recognize your child's early warning signs
- Knowing and avoiding the child's asthma triggers
- Helping the child follow a prescribed asthma management plan

Know your child's early warning signs

Why? Asthma causes more hospital stays and emergency room visits for children than any other childhood disease. Most children feel warning signs when an asthma “attack” is starting. Help your child learn what his signs are and to tell you when he has them. Knowing your child's warning signs can help you and his doctor make a plan to keep an “attack” from becoming severe.

Here is a list of early warning signs that you should watch out for:

- Dry cough
- Feeling tired (not wanting to “play”)
- Feeling sad, angry, moody or restless
- Trouble sleeping
- Stuffy nose, runny nose, watery eyes
- Sneezing, itchy throat (or throat that “tickles”)
- Stomachache
- Headache
- Fast heartbeat
- Tight chest
- Shortness of breath or fast breathing
- Wheezing

Know and avoid the child's asthma triggers

Things that cause asthma “attacks” are called triggers. There are many types of triggers, and they vary from child to child. Common triggers include:

- Tobacco smoke and smoke from other sources such as fireplaces
- Infections, flu, or colds
- Allergens such as pollen, mold, animal dander, feather, dust, food, and cockroaches
- Indoor and outdoor air pollutants, including ozone
- Vigorous exercise
- Exposure to cold air or sudden temperature change
- Excitement or stress

Follow a prescribed asthma management plan

You, your child and his doctor must work together to find the treatment plan that works best. Work with your child's doctor to set up a **written** management plan. Give a copy of the management plan to everyone who cares for your child (pre-school, childcare provider, family, church, etc.)

Your child's management plan should include:

- **How often** your child should see the doctor.
- **Which medicine to take**, how much and when.
- **Your child's triggers**. How you can manage them or help him stay away from them.
- **Warning signs** of an asthma attack.
- **What to do** when your child has an asthma attack.
- **When to call** your doctor, go to urgent care or the emergency room, or call 9-1-1.
- **Your doctor's name** and phone number.
- **Urgent care center** or emergency room phone number.

With a **good asthma treatment plan**, your child should:

- Be able to keep up with his usual activities
- Be free of asthma “attacks”
- Sleep through the night without waking (due to asthma)
- Have no visits to the hospital or emergency room (due to asthma)
- Have few side effects from asthma medicines

Your child’s asthma can be controlled.

Resources for further information:

Idaho Asthma Prevention and Control Project toll-free at Idaho CareLine 1 (800) 926-2588 [TDD (208) 332-7205] or by e-mail at woodwarj@idhw.state.id.us or visit our website at <http://www2.state.id.us/dhw/asthma/home.htm>

National Asthma Education and Prevention Program www.nhlbi.nih.gov/about/naepp/index.htm

American Lung Association www.lungusa.org/asthma/

Allergy and Asthma Network-Mothers of Asthmatics www.aanma.org/